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ABSTRACT

This paper examines disagreement over how second language learning tasks create conditions needed for language acquisition by exploring and comparing three second language acquisition theories: input-based; output-based; and interactionist. Each theory is described, and some new conclusions are drawn. It is argued that a task should: be meaningful; be cognitively appropriate; be fun; involve all participants in coming to a clear, defined conclusion; and allow for a planning stage. To accomplish the task, students need: support, through language boxes; different ways to say things; training in classroom feedback language; and pre-teaching. Contains 20 references. (MSE)

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Current Task-Based Language Teaching: Some Issues and Models

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Open up a textbook designed to teach English to non-native speakers these days and you will find "tasks" everywhere. Any sort of exercise is likely to be labeled a task: an information gap pairwork, a role-play or a drill. Task-based language learning (TBLT) is "hot." Perhaps because it is perceived as cutting-edge, however, TBLT remains somewhat isolated from other concerns within ELT. I hope here to connect TBLT to second language acquisition (SLA) research and to show that the reason materials developers should adopt tasks into their texts is not because tasks are flashy but because there are numerous rationales for using tasks within SLA. My main concern is to point out those areas within SLA research that support tasks and suggest how our materials might be improved by this knowledge.

Perhaps the "classic" definition of task is Nunan's (1989, p.10): "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form." Nunan would say, then, that a pairwork that serves as a drill to manipulate structures would not be a task. Students would need to exchange some sort of meaning. This focus on meaning in tasks is congruent with communicative language teaching. However, Ellis (1998, p. 226) summarizes the views of many when he says that tasks are something more than communicative exchanges. He claims, "Tasks function as devices for creating the conditions required for language acquisition. There is still uncertainty and disagreement, however, regarding, what these conditions are."

I want to sort out these disagreements by looking at three theories of SLA and seeing what we, as teachers and as materials developers, can learn from the approaches to tasks taken by the theories. The three theories are Input-based (exemplified by Krashen), Output-based (exemplified by Swain) and Interactionist (exemplified by a number of researchers, led by Long). As I sketch these theories, I will sometimes draw conclusions that the original authors did not make explicit. I will label these speculations and I hope I am not mis-representing their work in any way. My intent is to provoke thought. Finally, I will be speaking mostly of speaking tasks, because this is the focus of much of this research, though not all of it, as we will soon see.

Input-based SLA

Krashen is easily the most influential theorist of Input-based approaches to SLA. Krashen has constructed a complete theory of SLA (Krashen, 1985), one that remains controversial (Barasch & James, 1994). He says that people learn languages by understanding messages addressed to them at a level just beyond their current level of linguistic competence, what has been encapsulated as "i + 1." Krashen has also claimed that what he calls "the affective filter" has a role in acquisition in that anxious learners may block out comprehensible input. Listening is key to the process of acquisition and Krashen has supported comprehension-based approaches. Currently, he sees reading of easy, enjoyable materials as a key to language acquisition (Krashen, 1993).

Three ideas can be extrapolated from Krashen's work. The first is the necessity of meaning. People learn by understanding meaningful messages. The second is the issue of students' levels (i + 1). Students can work at a level just beyond their understanding. This has been taken into the conventional wisdom of ELT through the saying: Grade the task, not the language. The third issue is the necessity of an interesting, relaxed, fun classroom to break down the affective filter.

Meaning is so central to current language teaching and learning as to be axiomatic. No one can argue for meaningless, decontextualized language work, even though I am sure reasonable people might well argue over what philosophers call "the meaning of meaning."

The second idea we can take from Input-based approaches to SLA is more interesting. Indeed, the issue of the relationship of student levels to authenticity of materials is central to much discussion of contemporary teaching. Here, we have some research to consider when thinking about whether to present authentic, simplified or elaborated material to students. Long and Ross (1993) reviewed a number of studies that found linguistic simplification of texts helped student comprehension, but not consistently more than elaboration did. Elaborative modifications (redundancy, paraphrase, synonyms) did help, as did modifications that made the theme prominent (for example: "My sister, she's..."). Beck, Omanson and Pople (1984) have shown that making a text more coherent, adding background information and links between parts of the text, may make it more "difficult" (measured by elementary school grade reading level) yet may actually make it easier to read.

From this work, I take this advice: elaboration can be facilitative of comprehension. This means that students need some

way to elaborate so that their partner, in a pair or group, can better understand them. Materials developers can help students elaborate by giving them structured opportunities to plan what they want to say. Students can also be provided with language boxes that give several ways to say each utterance, resources to go beyond the prescribed pattern. Another way students can get elaborated, more understandable, responses is by knowing classroom management language (Could you repeat that? Excuse me?)

We also need to be constantly aware of the affective filter, particularly in EFL classrooms where motivation is often low. Key to motivation is interest, but as Williams and Burden point out, teachers need to go beyond "simply arousing interest." They need to sustain the interest so that students persist in trying to achieve their goals (1997, p. 121).

Output-based SLA

While researching the effectiveness of Canadian immersion classrooms, Allen and colleagues noted that while the focus was on communication, fewer than 15% of the utterances in one French immersion classroom were more than one clause in length. Also, there was little error correction. (Allen et al., 1990). Swain began to call for students to deliver "pushed output." That is, students would be put into situations in which they would be forced to make their language more concise and precise. This would lead to a move from semantic processing, in which learners are able to string words together and make themselves understood, to syntactic, grammatically correct, processing (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). These sorts of classroom tasks often have choice of correct form at their heart. If the wrong form is chosen, the partner will not understand the message. An example many teachers have used would be a preposition activity in which learners would have to draw certain objects in correct places.

How can we give students a way to make better output? As was recommended when addressing elaboration, we might offer training in classroom language and its strategic use, what some have called training in "active listening." But we need to recycle that training and suggest its use throughout the materials rather than leave it to the beginning of term and never after.

Interactionist SLA

The interactionist school of SLA has been known for its emphasis on the primacy of the "negotiation of meaning." This account of SLA has been research-driven, and there have been a

number of conclusions from the studies that are useful for materials developers and teachers.

One tradition in interactionist SLA has been research into the efficacy of certain kinds of tasks. A number of conclusions have been made (Long, 1990). The first is that two-way tasks lead to more negotiation of meaning than one-way tasks. A one-way task is one for which one learner has all the information and the other receives that information, as in telling a story. A two-way task is one in which both partners have information, as in an information-gap pairwork.

Other research has been done on closed and open tasks. In closed tasks, partners are forced to come to a mutually acceptable conclusion. Deciding on a candidate is a closed task while sharing opinions is open. Closed tasks lead to more negotiation of meaning, more topic and language "recycling", more feedback, and more precision (Ellis, 1994).

Research on interaction has been central to showing that groupwork is an effective tool in language learning (Long & Porter, 1985). Students' working together allows for more negotiation of meaning. Groups use time efficiently. Still, teachers worry that groups lead to fossilizing errors, though Porter has claimed that only 3% of errors she found could be attributed to repeating a partner's error. Perhaps the most troubling result of research on groups has been the finding that group participants tend to be pragmatically incorrect more often with each other than with a teacher (Porter, 1986).

More recently in this tradition, there has been research on planning. Planning -- rehearsing, looking up phrases, using a dictionary-- stretches interlanguage and may lead to more fluent and more accurate production. (Skehan,1998))

From interactionist research, we can draw a number of lessons. The first is that we have some idea of which kinds of task are more conducive to negotiation of meaning and stretching interlanguage: two-way, closed and planned. The second is that groupwork and pairwork can be efficient and useful to students. We need to give tasks goals, clear outcomes and offer a planning stage. Also from the research comes the idea that we must not ignore appropriacy. Again, giving students sociolinguistically appropriate ways to say what they want to say should be part of the task.

Conclusion

I am arguing that we know many of the elements of good tasks. At minimum, a task should:

1. be meaningful. That does not mean that a task cannot be focused on language. Indeed, talking about the language can be very meaningful and helpful.
2. be cognitively appropriate. Grade the task, not the language.
3. be fun
4. optimally, involve all participants in coming to a defined, clear conclusion
5. allow for a planning stage

We also know that students should have resources to accomplish the task. They need:

1. support, through language boxes
2. different ways to say things
3. training in classroom feedback language (I don't understand. How do you say X in English?)
4. pre-teaching.

Too often tasks mean throwing students into the deep end of the pool and hoping they surface. We know a lot about tasks and we can do better than that.

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